

*Kevin Carbery, Jefferson County Journal*

A local Head Start official said she hopes legislation backed by U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan makes it through Congress.

This spring, Carnahan, D-St. Louis, proposed an amendment to the Improving Head Start Act of 2007 that allows Head Start grantees to negotiate a funded enrollment level with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) if the funding does not keep pace with inflation.

What this would mean to Head Start programs would be the ability to adjust their budgets to pay for higher gas and heating costs, said Bev Henry, director of the Jefferson-Franklin Community Action Corporation (JFCAC) Head Start program.

"Basically, what the legislation does is alleviate the problem we've had the last few years where funds have been frozen or cut, even though we've still had to provide the same number of services," she explained. "This legislation would give me the right to adjust our services to our amount of funding."

Henry said that as the situation now stands, Head Start programs are bound by DHHS to offer services to designated numbers of children. While removing some children from the program is not an optimal solution, it would give the agencies more discretion in how to allocate whatever funding is available to them.

"We would try to not cut back any children," Henry said. "We would not cut any children until we absolutely had to. We would start with things like field trips and other expendable items.

"(The legislation) is just a way of helping Head Start programs cope. Everyone's been hit by the increased heating and fuel costs."

Carnahan's amendment has found support on Capitol Hill, Henry said.

"It's passed the House and has to get through the Senate," she reported.

A Carnahan spokesperson explained the representative's position.

"Basically, the congressman saw the need for an amendment after realizing that several groups in the St. Louis metro area are struggling to provide quality Head Start programs," Shannon O'Brien, a Carnahan spokesperson, said. "The federal government has neither funded the program at adequate levels nor adjusted funding levels for inflation.

"Because HHS dictates the minimum number of kids enrolled in the programs the grantees (those who receive money for Head Start programs) can have, the groups are often forced to stretch their limited funds for use by a lot of kids. This is not to say that we don't want more children to benefit from Head Start programs, but that the quality of the program suffers when it is under-funded, not adjusted for inflation and has too many children for the resources granted."

The JFCAC Head Start program has assisted 565 preschool children between the ages of 3 and 5 so far this year, Henry reported.

"We've been around 42 years," Henry said. "Head Start is a program that addresses health and education needs of preschool children in low-income homes.

"We have preschool four days a week. We provide free meals and free transportation. We have a multitude of health services that cater to their medical and dental needs."

For more information about the JFCAC Head Start program, call 636-789-3563.